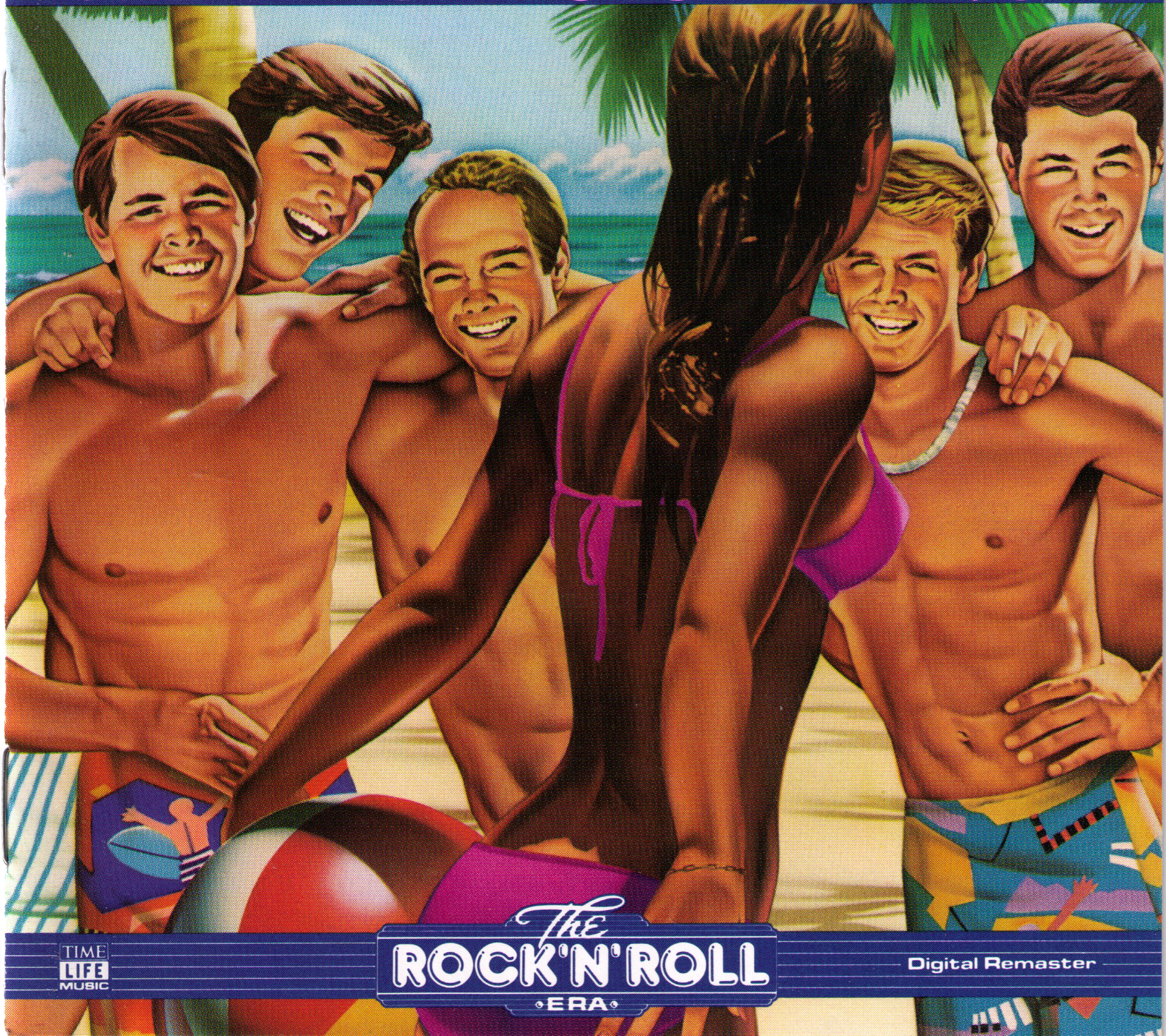


THE BEACH BOYS: 1962-1967



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THE BEACH BOYS: 1962-1967

The California described in the Beach Boys' songs existed largely in Brian Wilson's head. This shy, partially deaf teenager never surfed; instead he spent hours in the family den playing the piano and imagining a utopian California where the girls were always friendly, the sun was always beaming and every day was exciting.

"Brian, in fact, did stay home and create a whole world at the piano," agrees his youngest brother Carl, the Beach Boys' lead guitarist. "Brian made this whole picture, and people were mad to get to California. There was an awe connected to California and the way we lived. But it wasn't the real California so much as the California in Brian's songs."

Its appeal lay not so much in the lyrics about cars, beaches and girls as in the music itself. It was easy to believe that California was a land of perpetual happiness when every Beach Boys single throbbed with restless melodies sung by yearning voices; and that all frustration could be dispelled there when Brian magically resolved the oddest chord changes and most dissonant intervals into glorious harmonies.

The Wilson family lived in a lower-middle-class housing development in Hawthorne, a Los Angeles suburb. By the fall of 1961, 19-year-old Brian was pressing 14-year-old Carl and mother Audree into standing by the piano to sing the intricate vocal arrangements he had worked out in imitation of the Four Freshmen. Sometimes Brian's first cousin Mike Love, who had interested Brian in the R & B styles of the Coasters and Frankie Lymon, and Al Jardine, a junior college classmate, also joined in. The middle Wilson brother, 16-year-old Dennis (the only real surfer among them), was rarely around to take part. Yet it was he who urged the aspiring musicians to write a song about the up-and-coming surfing craze.

At the end of 1961, the five young men cut eight

songs for the local Candix label. *Surfin'*, written by Brian and Mike at Dennis' suggestion, became a regional hit and also broke into the top 100 nationally. But Candix folded, and after rejections by several other recording companies Jardine gave up and went off to dental school; David Marks replaced him temporarily. At that point, the Beach Boys could have become just another of the hundreds of one-hit wonders.

However, the Wilsons' father, Murry, was not so easily discouraged. He dragged demonstration tapes all over town until Capitol Records finally signed the Beach Boys in 1962. *Surfin' Safari*, their first Capitol single (included in Time-Life's 1962 album), charted at No. 14 in *Billboard*. The real breakthrough came just months later when Brian adapted Chuck Berry's *Sweet Little Sixteen* into *Surfin' U.S.A.* (included in the 1963 album) and showed off his dense, polished production style for the first time. *Surfin' U.S.A.* (backed with **Shut Down**) made it to No. 3 as a single, and its namesake album went to No. 2. Suddenly Carl, who was still in high school, and Dennis, who was still learning the drums, found themselves playing to packed houses in places like Des Moines and Philadelphia. The Beach Boys didn't pay their dues before they achieved stardom; they paid them later.

Having made the *Surfin' U.S.A.* album mostly on his own, Brian refused to work anymore with Capitol's producers. Carl later explained the reason why: "Brian told them, 'Look, I'm not cutting with these guys, and what's more, I'm not going to use your studio. We'll just send you the next record.' Now this was a big thing in those days, because record companies were used to having absolute control over their artists. It was especially nervy, because Brian was a 21-year-old kid with just two albums. It was unheard of. But what could they say? Brian made good records."

Once Brian got control, things started happening fast. In the midst of the Beatles invasion, the Beach Boys placed song after song on the charts. Each record was a little more sophisticated than the last. Brian, who admired Phil Spector, creator of the legendary “wall of sound” productions for hits by the Crystals and the Ronettes, adapted Spector’s approach and applied it to songs that were far more complex than anything Spector had ever dealt with.

Brian’s musical growth can be heard in the records. On **Surfer Girl** (1963) he sings the lead atop voices that rise and fall with almost palpable yearning over his triplet bass patterns. **Fun, Fun, Fun** (1964) builds excitement as the voices add ever-spreading harmonies (Brian provides the soaring falsetto, as he did on all the early hits) without slowing the galloping momentum. **California Girls** (1965) opens with a majestic 12-string-guitar intro that explodes with an irresistible rhythmic figure leading into Mike Love’s vocal.

At the same time, there were signs that the fun wasn’t unalloyed or endless. **In My Room** (1963) was a surprisingly melancholy tune about retreating from the world to the refuge of one’s bedroom. In **Don’t Worry Baby** (1964), perhaps the grandest song of this first period, three distinct vocal lines surround the listener with the utmost reassurance; yet Brian sings the foreboding line: “I don’t know why, but I keep thinking something’s bound to go wrong.”

It did. In 1965, suffering from the pressures of writing, producing, performing—and supporting his whole family—Brian suffered a nervous breakdown. He retired from the road, devoting himself to the studio. Glen Campbell replaced him briefly before surf-music veteran Bruce Johnston joined up permanently. With Al Jardine back in the group, the Beach Boys went on tour while Brian composed two of the best rock albums ever made.

Paul McCartney said of 1966’s *Pet Sounds*, “That album

Landlubbers almost to a man, the Beach Boys appear to scout good curls and surfer girls on the cover of their first Capitol album, Surfin’ Safari, released in 1962.





just flipped me. Still is one of my favorite albums—the musical invention on that is just amazing. When I heard it, I thought, 'Oh dear, this is the album of all time. What the hell are we going to do?' My ideas for *Sergeant Pepper* took off from that standard."

Brian was tired of making pop singles; he wanted to make an album-length statement like the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*. He had grown up and now wanted to capture the awkward doubts (**God Only Knows**) and eager expectancy (**Wouldn't It Be Nice?**) that go along with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Brian backed these themes with some of the richest music he ever gave the public.

Capitol was lukewarm about *Pet Sounds*, and it did not sell as well as most of the preceding Beach Boys albums. Brian nonetheless kept on working, crafting the three-and-a-half-minute "pocket symphony" **Good Vibrations**, their all-time biggest-selling single. Using cello, theremin (an electronic instrument that produces eerie warbling sounds), fuzz bass and organ along with dozens of vocal parts, the song doesn't move from verse to chorus and back again, like most rock songs; it moves from section to section, like a suite. Yet it communicates Brian's utopian California more persuasively than any other record he ever made.

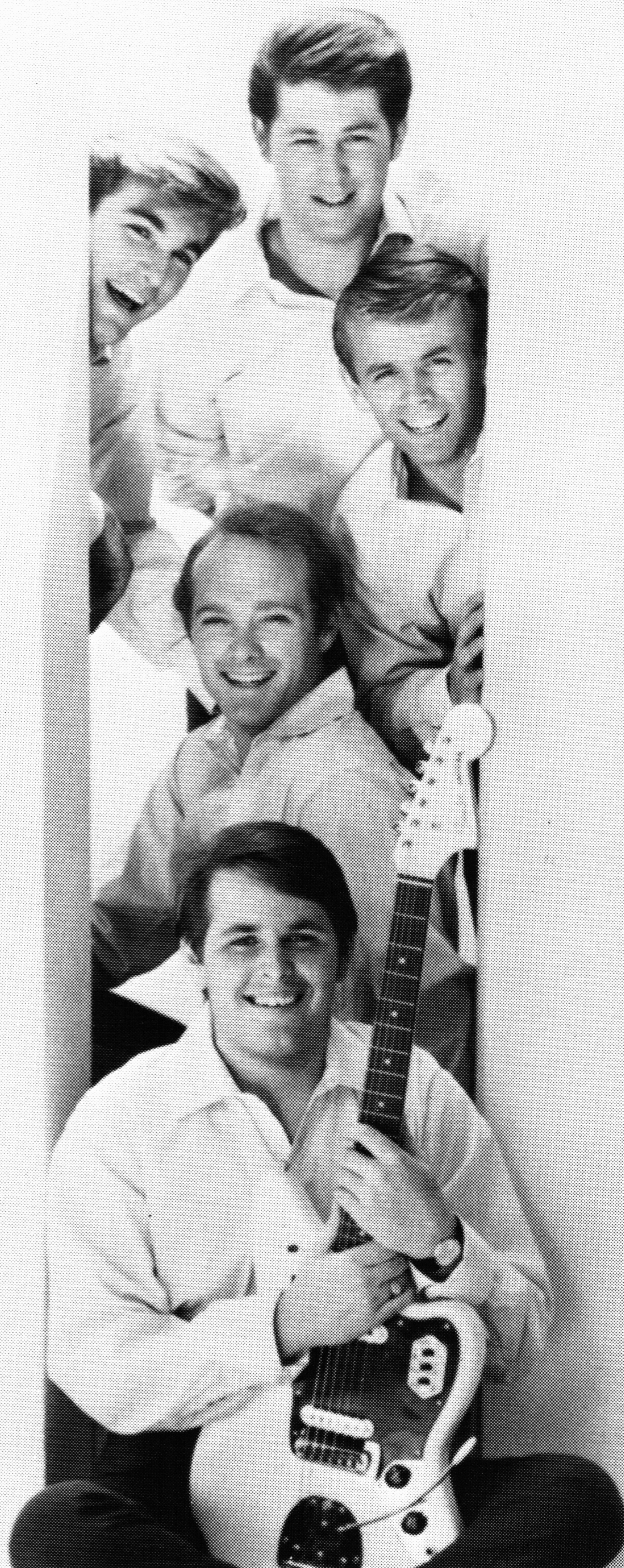
Brian then embarked on an ambitious album that was to be called *Smile*. Collaborating with experimental songwriter Van Dyke Parks, he recorded several additional "pocket symphonies" (among them **Heroes and Villains**)—they dealt with the elements, American myths and childlike romance—that picked up musically where *Good Vibrations* stopped. Unfortunately, drugs and internal squabbles took their toll and the album was never completed. Although some of this material was later reworked in less elaborate form and issued in the albums *Smiley Smile* and *20/20*, much of it still has never been legitimately released.

The Beach Boys produced two very good albums in 1967: the whimsical *Smiley Smile* and the R & B-flavored *Wild Honey*. But Brian, his spirit apparently broken by the collapse of the *Smile* project, withdrew from his leadership role. While the group has since made a few strong albums, such as *Sunflower* (1970) and *The Beach Boys Love You* (1977), and scored with an occasional hit single like *Rock and Roll Music* (1976), they have never fully regained their creative vitality. Despite the tragic loss of Dennis Wilson by drowning in 1983, the Beach Boys persist as a popular touring act, relying heavily on the songs that evoke nostalgia in their audiences.

Their idealistic dream of a carefree, adventurous life dissolved by 1967, as they became adults very much part of the real world. Like Elvis Presley, Brian Wilson had created a myth that raised a generation's hopes, only to find that he couldn't live up to it himself. But, as with Presley, the aura of Wilson's California will live on long after the last Beach Boys record reaches the public.

—Geoffrey Himes

Carl clutches a six-string type Jaguar before Dennis, Brian, Al and Mike (clockwise from top left).



DISCOGRAPHY

**Indicates highest Billboard chart position*

- 1. Fun, Fun, Fun** (2:04) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5118 (1964). No. 5**
- 2. 409** (1:58) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson and Gary Usher. Capitol 4777 (1962). No. 76**
- 3. Surfer Girl** (2:25) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5009 (1963). No. 7**
- 4. Be True to Your School** (2:07) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5069 (1963). No. 6**
- 5. In My Room** (2:09) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson and Gary Usher. Capitol 5069 (1963). No. 23**
- 6. I Get Around** (2:12) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5174 (1964). No. 1**
- 7. Shut Down** (1:50) *Music by Brian Wilson, lyrics by Roger Christian. Capitol 4932 (1963). No. 23**
- 8. When I Grow Up (To Be a Man)** (2:00) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5245 (1964). No. 9**
- 9. Little Deuce Coupe** (1:40) *Music by Brian Wilson, lyrics by Roger Christian. Capitol 5009 (1963). No. 15**
- 10. Wendy** (2:16) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5267 (1964). No. 44**
- 11. Don't Worry Baby** (2:45) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson and Roger Christian. Capitol 5174 (1964). No. 24**
- 12. California Girls** (2:44) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5464 (1965). No. 3**

- 13. Dance, Dance, Dance** (2:00) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson. Capitol 5306 (1964). No. 8**
- 14. Barbara Ann** (2:05) *Music and lyrics by Fred Fassert. Capitol 5561 (1966). No. 2**
- 15. The Little Girl I Once Knew** (2:36) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5540 (1965). No. 20**
- 16. Do You Wanna Dance?** (2:18) *Music and lyrics by Bobby Freeman. Capitol 5372 (1965). No. 12**
- 17. Help Me, Rhonda** (2:45) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5395 (1965). No. 1**
- 18. Good Vibrations** (3:35) *Music by Brian Wilson, lyrics by Mike Love and Brian Wilson. Capitol 5676 (1966). No. 1**
- 19. Sloop John B.** (2:55) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson. Capitol 5602 (1966). No. 3**
- 20. Wouldn't It Be Nice?** (2:22) *Music by Brian Wilson, lyrics by Tony Asher and Brian Wilson. Capitol 5706 (1966). No. 8**
- 21. God Only Knows** (2:46) *Music by Brian Wilson, lyrics by Tony Asher and Brian Wilson. Capitol 5706 (1966). No. 39**
- 22. Heroes and Villains** (3:36) *Music and lyrics by Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks. Brother 1001 (1967). No. 12**

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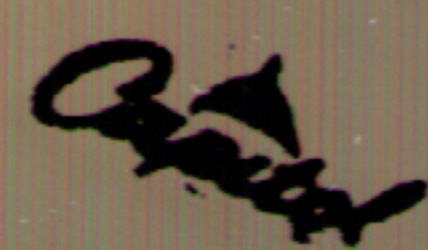
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